

I am humbled and honored to stand here tonight. The list of historians who have won this award in past years is awe-inspiring. I have assigned their books and articles for three decades now, never imagining that my name might one day be associated with theirs. Kenneth Stamp, James McPherson, Don Fehrenbacher; models of the craft, all. And for this white boy from the Arizona suburbs, reading John Hope Franklin's magisterial *From Slavery to Freedom* as an undergraduate was quite the awakening. I believe that every writer who has ever captured this prize appears in my footnotes, and *Thunder at the Gates* would not exist without their influential, ground-breaking scholarship. I am of course also grateful to jurors Michael Burlingame, Earl Hess, and Martha Hodges, as well as to Richard Gilder and Lewis Lehrman for their generous support of American history.

Thirty-seven years ago next fall, I arrived at Georgetown. Richard Duncan introduced me to the complexities of the Civil War era, and Marcus Rediker taught me that a lively narrative and vigorous prose are not the enemy of sophisticated analysis. Decades later now, I wish also to thank Dan Gerstle, my wonderful editor at Basic Books, for keeping me on track while allowing my voice to emerge. I habitually write over my word count, and cutting some of my stories was painful. But what developed was a far tighter and, I hope, a far smarter book. So many of my projects begin with a call from Dan Green, my superb agent. Dan knows more history than most historians, and were it not for him, I would not be here this evening. My beautiful daughters, Kearney and Hannah, really had nothing to do with this book. But they are brilliant and industrious and perfect in every way and so deserve mention for that. Most of all, I need to thank my wife, Leigh Fought, who read and marked up every page of the manuscript. Together with the generous David Blight, also of course a previous Lincoln Prize winner, she is one of the country's leading authorities on Frederick Douglass, whose sons Lewis and Charles were two of

the soldiers I chronicled in my volume. This book, rather like my life, would be a vastly poorer piece without her contribution.

At Gettysburg, Abraham Lincoln famously wondered whether his words could properly do justice to “the brave men, who struggled” there. Quite often, as I wrote about the men who volunteered for the three pioneering Massachusetts regiments, I had precisely the same worry. I have never believed that the purpose of history is to identify heroes and villains, and the fourteen soldiers I chose to write about were often complicated, imperfect people. But their courage under fire was stunning, as was their bravery in taking on American racism. I first became aware of one of them, Stephen Swails, while writing my *Wars of Reconstruction*. A boatman from Elmira and a sometimes waiter in Cooperstown, Swails enlisted in the Fifty-fourth at the age of thirty in large part to escape a troubled, dissolute youth. Fired from one job “for habitual drunkenness and dishonesty,” Swails left his girlfriend Sarah Thompson behind. Sarah was pregnant, and although Swails returned home on leave long enough to sire one more child, he never married Sarah, and at war’s end he opted to remain in Charleston, where he married a wealthy free woman of color, and went into state politics.

Yet whatever his personal failings, Swails was a natural leader, beloved by his men, and absolutely unflinching in battle. He survived the July 16 fight on James Island and the assault on Battery Wagner two days later. At Olustee, a stray ball creased his right temple, gouging a furrow two inches long and fracturing his skull. Swails fought on until he passed out; his men bundled the bleeding sergeant into a cart and carried him off the field. At Wateree Junction, just as the war was ending, the light-skinned Swails fell victim to friendly fire, when one of his own sharpshooters mistook him for a Confederate engineer. Swails simply tied his arm into a sling while he continued to pack his wounded men aboard a stolen locomotive. In reward for his

exemplary service, Governor John A. Andrew pressed the War Department to allow Swails promotion into the ranks of commissioned officers, and Swails was mustered out a lieutenant.

Equally complicated and equally inspirational was Edward Needles Hallowell, a Philadelphia Quaker and the second colonel to lead the Fifty-fourth after the death of Robert Gould Shaw. Ned, as he preferred to be called, was raised in a large, loving family whose members bestowed pet names on one another yet retained the formal address of “thee” and “thou” in all of their correspondence. Ned contracted typhoid fever early in the conflict and was shot in the groin at Wagner. By the February 1864 fight at Olustee, Ned was so accustomed to be shot at that he mounted a stump to better view the unfolding *mêlée*. One admiring soldier remarked that despite the danger of Confederate sharpshooters, Ned stood calmly, “as if the boys were playing a small game of ball.” As a son of privilege, Hallowell had no desire to plunder the plantations his regiment liberated, but he loved his wine, and his letters home were filled with lengthy descriptions of the vintage and quality of the alcohol he found hidden in Carolina mansions. Ned was stationed in the lowcountry when word arrived of Lincoln’s assassination. “In a few days thy devoted son will be off again killing and destroying,” he informed his mother, “avenging the murder of our leader.” Never well after the war, Hallowell passed away in 1871 at the age of thirty-four. “His military record was as good as any fighting Quaker could desire,” one journalist marveled.

Far and away, the soldier I most came to admire was young James Henry Gooding. Born a slave in North Carolina, Gooding was acquired and freed at the age of eight by his father, a white “country merchant” who loved his enslaved mother, as he later purchased and then married her. James Henry was raised in Manhattan’s Colored Orphan Asylum before relocating to New Bedford and signing onto a whaler as a sea cook. Gooding loved to read Dickens, and the job

allowed him to read most of the day before the time came to prepare the crew's dinner. Gooding was not only among the first to enlist in the Fifty-fourth, but he helped to organize a "war meeting" at New Bedford's Liberty Hall, before marching a dozen recruits to Camp Meigs.

Gooding survived the battle on James Island and was close enough to Rob Shaw to see his commander fall at Wagner. But his moral courage was as great as his physical bravery. Furious about the Army's discriminatory pay scale, in late September of 1863, Corporal Gooding decided to submit his grievance to his ultimate superior: Commander in Chief Abraham Lincoln. "Now the main question is, Are we *Soldiers*, or are we Laborers?" Gooding promised to fight on, but he prayed that the president might fight for him as well. "We feel as though our Country spurned us," he concluded, "now that we are sworn to serve her." Although the president did not reply, he clearly read the letter and forwarded it to the War Department.

Gooding's luck ran out at Olustee. He was shot in the thigh, captured, and carried to Andersonville Prison. The camp's commander, Henry Wirz, hated those he dubbed "white negroes," and Gooding was mixed-race. Placed on the "Negro Squad," a unit assigned the task of burying the dead, Gooding refused unless white prisoners served as well. For that offense, Confederate guards beat him to death on July 19, 1864—a year and a day after Wagner—and five weeks shy of his twenty-sixth birthday.

In the months before Wagner, white politicians and soldiers, especially those from the Midwest or loyal border states, condemned Governor Andrew's pioneering regiment. Ohio private Chauncey Welton assured his parents that his company did not "think much" of the Emancipation Proclamation, "for we did not enlist to fight for the negro." Such sentiments diminished quickly after July 18. Sergeant Major Lewis Douglass was scrambling up Wagner's sandy front, waving his sword and shouting "Come on, boys, and fight for God and Governor

Andrew” when grapeshot blasted off his scabbard and hammered pellets into his pelvis and thighs. “If I die tonight,” Lewis thought, as men from his company followed him into the fort, “I will not die a coward.” Despite the failure to capture the battery that night, the courage of the Fifty-fourth stunned the nation. The Republican and abolitionist press provided most of the praise, with Horace Greeley’s *New-York Tribune* writing that the battle “made Fort Wagner such a name to the colored race as Bunker Hill has been to white Yankees.” But even the *Chicago Tribune*, a longtime Lincoln critic, acknowledged that public opinion had suddenly shifted. “Opposition to make a soldier of the negro has nearly ceased everywhere,” its editor admitted. The “thing, therefore, is now settled—the negroes will fight.”

Nearly fifteen hundred men volunteered for the Fifty-fourth, with only slightly smaller numbers in the Fifty-fifth and Fifth Cavalry. Ohio farmers comprised the third largest contingent in the Fifty-fourth, and the single largest in its sister unit. This, despite the fact that Ohio did not allow them to cast a ballot, relegated their children to segregated and inferior schools, and that, thanks to the still-living Chief Justice Roger Taney, they were not citizens in the land of their birth. They faced discriminatory pay until June 1864, and ran the risk of enslavement or brutalization by Confederates if captured. With this book, I hope that I have done some small justice to these soldiers—and to their wives and, too often, their widows—but I would like to think that with this prize, you have honored them as much as you have honored me.